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AN IRISH FOLK-TALE

CONTRIBUTED BY KATE WOODBRIDGE MICHAELIS

THE following variant of a well-known popular tale was taken down from the lips of a recently arrived Irish maid in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

THREE MEN OF GALWAY

Over beyant, on the road to Galway, there were three cabins that stood side by side, each the same as all the rest; and in them lived three cousins, with their three mothers and their three cows. Times was hard then in Ireland, — and has been since, — and the cousins had to work hard to put bread in their stomachs and breath in their bodies; so one day the eldest cousin says to the others, "Let us drive our cows to market and sell them for a good price, and be rich then!" and the others agreed.

Now, it chanced that the youngest cousin's cow was very lean entirely, the smallest and poorest of all the cows in the land; and as the three walked together, the other two said teasing words to him, because it was little his cow would bring in the market.

At last the youngest cousin got vexed indeed, and says he to his cousins, "Go you to the market with your large and fine cows, me and my cow will bide here. I will kill her and sell the hide and tallow." So he bided, and the others went on. Well, after he was tired of being vexed, he up and killed his little cow, and began to strip the hide off her carcass. While he worked, — and mind you, it was not the nicest of work, — who should come hopping along but a big magpie, head on one side, looking wise indeed.

"Peck-peck!" says he, like any human, for he caught a smell of the blood; so up he hopped on the hide to see what it was all about; and immediate the youngest cousin whipped over the hide, master Magpie inside, and started for the nearest tavern, hide and bird under his arm.

When he got to the tavern, in he marched, bold as you please, calling out for a nip of whiskey to stay his stomach, for it was near to starving the poor boy was. So the barmaid — she was the daughter of the host — she looked him over, and, seeing that he was dressed the poorest and had nought with him but a bundle of bloody hide, just served him with the worst but one of the whiskeys of the world. As soon as the cousin got the taste of it on his tongue, he put his foot on the bundle of hide, and the magpie within screeched out loud.

"And what's that?" says the girl.

"'Tis my magpie, warning me," says the cousin.

"And what is he after warning you?" says the girl.

"He's warning me of the poorness of the whiskey," says he. So the girl, not believing him at all, nodded her head to herself, and put before him the one other whiskey that could be worse.

Now, the minute he smelled of it, down came the cousin's foot as hard as might be, and loud screeched out the poor craythur below.

"And this is poorer still, he tells me," says the youngest cousin.

"Faix, and it's right he is," says the girl. So she ran and called her father, who came, all in a hurry, to see the bird that was telling tales on his whiskeys. When he had talked with the cousin, and the bird had cocked the bright eye at it, nothing would suit him but he must own it; so he offered money for it, till at last the youngest cousin went off with his pockets full of gold, and the bird biding behind at the tavern.

When the two older cousins came back from the market, it was long faces they had, for never a one had asked to buy their cows, and they were foot-sore and weary. When they saw the youngest cousin sitting by his door and counting over his gold, they were dumb-struck. When they could get breath to question him, he boasted that he had killed and stripped his cow, rolled a magpie in its hide, and taken it to the public-house, where he had sold it to the landlord for all that gold.

"And is it buying bloody magpies he is?" asked the cousins.

"Faix, and it is," says he.

As soon as morning comes, up gets the two cousins, kills their fine fat cows, strips them, catches two magpies, wraps them in the skins, and hurries off with them to the nearest inn. Then, of course, the landlord just laughs in their faces, and when they talk back, drives them out with hard words. Home they came, pocket-empty, and vexed indeed with the youngest cousin. Now, it chanced that he, hiding safe from them, heard the threats they made. So when the night came, he coaxed his old mother to sleep in his bed, and himself got well into the chimney. In came the two cousins, creeping easy, fell upon the poor mother, — who was the aunt of the two of them, heaven rest her soul! — and left her cold and dead. Up came the youngest cousin out of the chimney, fixed up his mother in her best clothes all fine, and carried her on his back to the house of a farmer who had the best well in all the country round. As it was early, he propped his old mother against the well, her back to the house, and when it was light, went to the door and asked to buy wine for himself and for her.

"It's bashful she is," says he to the daughter of the farmer, "and never a step will she come into the house. Go you out with the wine and give it to her. It's hard of hearing she is," says he, "so you must pinch her and shake her well if she does not turn round."

Out went the girl with the wine, called loud, bellowed, then, at the last, up and shook her good, when into the well, head and heels, went she. At that the girl she ran away screaming out; and when she did not come back, the youngest cousin went out and found his mother deep in the well. And the storming of the man! crying out and stomping his feet, and saying that it was all the mother he had in the world! At this came out the farmer and gave him all the gold he had in the house to stop his noise, lest the people going by should hear it. And the farmer took the old woman out of the well that very day, for fear she should spoil the water; for it was a very good well, that was.

When the two cousins got up next morning, who should they see but the youngest cousin with a great bag of gold.

"And how come you alive?" said they, well vexed.

"Faix," says he, "it was my mother you killed, and I've been to the village beyant and sold her for all this gold. It's a great price they are paying for old hags for gunpowder," says he.

So the two of them lost no time in killing their mothers, put them in bags, and hurried off to the village, calling out, loud, "Old hags for gunpowder! Old hags for gunpowder!" and then the people were quite mad with them. They fell upon them and beat them, and shut them up in the jail, for killing of their mothers, nice tidy old dames that they were!

Well, after they got out again, they came home; and there they found the youngest cousin living on the best to be had, and they did n't like it at all, at all. It was a great deal they said to him about the lot of trouble he had given them; and they were so vexed at him, that he saw he had best beware. So he kept far away from them. But one day he was searching after rabbits, which he well liked for his supper, and had just caught two, when he saw the two cousins after him; and before he could hide from them, they were upon him, had him tied, and in a bag, ready to put an end to him. But just as they were tying the bag, he managed slyly to break the foot of each rabbit he had caught, one the left, and the other the right, and let them go free; and off they scuttled, one to the right and the other to the left. Now, the two cousins also liked well, rabbits for supper; and, having the youngest cousin fast tied, they left him there in the bag, and off they ran, chasing the rabbits.

Now, it chanced well for the youngest cousin that while they were pursuing of the woods in search of the rabbits, along came a jobber, driving a herd of cattle to the fair; and he heard the youngest cousin in the bag singing out gay that he was going to heaven, for he had heard the jobber going by. The jobber, he was having a hard time, poor man! and he had heard that heaven was a fine place.

"And how do you get there?" says he to the cousin in the bag.

"Get you into this bag, and I will show you," says the youngest cousin. So the jobber cut the strings of the bag, and out leapt the cousin and put the jobber in the bag in his place, tied fast the strings, and bid him wait for the angels to carry him straight to heaven. Then home went the youngest cousin by the shortest road, driving of the herd of cattle before him.

After a bit, came back the two cousins, with no rabbits and bad in their tempers, picked up the bag, and threw it, man and all, into a hole without a bottom, and went home. And, behold! when they turned the corner, there was the youngest cousin, large as life, and a great deal more natural, smoking his pipe after the milking of his new cows. And beside his stool was the bag of gold the jobber had left behind him on the ground.

"And is it out of the hole you are?" says they, hardly trusting to their eyesight.

"It is, indeed," says he, "and it's much obliged to you I am for putting me in. Mind that gold now!"

"And where did you get it?" said they.

"In the bottom of the hole," says he, "and it's many a bag I had to leave behind me when I climbed out. There was but two I had time for; and one I gave to a jobber passing by, for a fine herd of cattle that was just after eating its supper in the field beyant."

Then the two cousins, they just fell on his neck, and they said they would forgive him everything, and never kill him again, if he would but tell them how to get to that hole, for the way had gone clean out of their minds.

So off the three went, side by side, as pleasant as you please; and when they came to the hole, "One at a time!" says the youngest cousin; so he tied the eldest cousin well into a bag, and pitched him into the hole. But when he could find no bottom to it, he began to cry out and to curse.

"Faix, and what may that noise be?" says the middle cousin.

"It's our cousin crying out for joy at the bags of gold," says the youngest cousin; then the middle cousin ran quick to the bag and got in without help, he was so feared that the eldest cousin would get the biggest share of the gold. Then the youngest cousin tied him up well and pitched him down into the well. And there the two of them are to this very day.

But the youngest cousin took his pick of the three cabins, and he married a fine wife and had plenty of children, and money to spare for every one of them; and when he died, he left a cabin apiece to three of them, but the rest of his family went over to America, and very likely they are dead by now.